

Doing Theology in a Garbage Dump

The Rough Grounds and Theological Method

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1. The Rough Grounds of Payatas and Elsewhere

The sub-title written on the flyer for this talk reads "the rough grounds and theological method". Let me first share with you the grounds from where I stand. I am a professor of theology. For the most part of any week, I teach seminarians, sisters and lay people, check papers, do research, etc. But on weekends, I help my Vincentian confreres in their parish in Payatas, the biggest garbage dump in Manila. I have been assisting there for around 12 years now. At first, I was invited there to help in giving pastoral care - celebrate Masses or bless the dead, give seminars, meet people. Later, I began to realize that it was not mainly I who was helping. It was in fact they who were helping me make sense of my theology. But that is going ahead of the story.

No actual census has been done in Payatas, but estimates give you around 40-45 thousand people living around a 16-hectare dumpsite facility. At any given Sunday Mass, no one can tell if someone is a scavenger or not. But it is said that there are around 10,000 people working in shifts in the dumpsite facility. On an ordinary day, for instance, a scavenger may come home with 7-10 dollars in his pocket. If one is lucky and finds a gold necklace among the refuse, one can sell it for 30-40 dollars! But of course that happens perhaps only once in a lifetime. When the Vincentians first came to Payatas 25 years ago, the roads were not paved. It was muddy all over; the stink of the garbage penetrated one's skin; flies were swarming all over the place. Today, the situation is much better, although flies still abound! Aside from doing traditional parish work, the Vincentians also administer many other social services such as child-learning centers, programs for the elderly, savings mobilization, community health services, savings and housing programs, cooperatives and many others.

There was one program I fondly remember: we once had a water facility and a very small swimming pool for children next to the garbage heap. Here, mothers could leave their children while they did chores and young boys and girls could take showers after spending the day in the dump. After some time, the garbage company decided to expand the heap; and the swimming pool was sadly the first to go. Just last year, the chapel where we celebrate

Sunday Masses also had to go along with hundreds of shanties around it. People are being forced to give way to the garbage.

After Sunday Masses, people would often invite me to their small houses for simple celebrations - be it birthday parties or wedding anniversaries. But at times I would also be asked to bless their dead, some of them very beautiful children in makeshift cardboard coffins who have died of diarrhea or respiratory ailments - illnesses otherwise curable with minimum medical intervention.

The Payatas situation may be of interest to people in various fields, e.g., quality pastoral intervention, community organizing, ecological sustainability, urban planning, etc. But for a theologian like me who shuttles between the dumpsite and the classroom, I am led to ask the question: "How do these rough grounds affect the way that I do theology?" For instance, how do the questions and the painful lives of these people affect the way I think about God, salvation, morality, etc? Far from being abstract, these questions often spell life and death for millions of people in the margins. And I am not only talking of Payatas, but of 3.8 billion people (half of the world's population) who live on 2.5 dollars a day as of the latest UN survey. If the Church still wants to walk the way of Jesus, it needs to listen to them because their lives alone already pose painful questions to the kind of salvation Jesus brings. That is why this quote from Ludwig Wittgenstein comes in handy:

We have got onto slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk, so we need friction. Back to the rough ground! (*Philosophical Investigations*)

Though Wittgenstein was referring to the crystalline purity of logic that does not work in real life, I am transposing its relevance to theology. The academe (which is the location for many of us) and our theories do not display real friction with actual life and death consequences. We can dissect issues from left to right, from top to bottom or vice versa and debate endlessly. Many of these do not work in the rough grounds like Payatas. We want to walk. So, "back to the rough ground," Wittgenstein reminds us, because their rough lives pose "painful questions" to the way that we do theology and ministry.

2. Their Lives as Painful Questions

Let me mention some questions which Payatas has brought about. First, there was a big debate in the Synod about communion for divorced and remarried Catholics. In the end,

it did not also get the needed votes. But from the perspective of Payatas, one actually wonders what the big issue is. I remember the leaders of our BECs in those areas. Most of them only had civil marriages because a church marriage is too expensive and the requirements onerous. Since we do not have a divorce law in the Philippines, some who had been previously married will never be able to marry their present partners at all. They are cohabitating not because they want to know whether they are compatible or not (as is sometimes in the First World countries), but because they have no choice. These are committed couples. They have responsibly taken care of their children; some of them are grandparents by now. "Gradualness" may be a good thing and is presently being contemplated by progressive theologians. But is it in their intention - a movement from civil to church marriage? Or a planned progress from cohabitation to the Sacrament? No. Not even. For many people on the ground, cohabitation is all that they have because other avenues are closed to them. As if the pain of survival is not heavy enough, the Church still reinforces guilt on the consciences of these otherwise faithful couples by restricting their participation in Church ministries or prohibiting communion. To be honest, for many of the couples that I know, they do not bother themselves about this anymore. And they keep serving the Church or going to communion. They did not tell me about their 'irregular' situations. I also did not ask. They often say, "If the Church does not accept my situation, I hope God understands me." I do ask myself: is this the kind of callous Church that I want to serve?

Let us take another area: liturgy. In a recent article that I wrote, I tried to analyze the direction of Magisterium's document on the liturgy from 1980s up to our times. What I see are three recognizable directions: the emphasis on "sacrifice", liturgical centralization and "Eucharistic amazement". To give us some examples of their concerns, some of them bordering on the ridiculous: preference for the Latin language and Gregorian chant, the reverential silence in the Mass, Eucharistic adorations, details of how to wear the stoles and chasubles, what type of chalices to use. It has always bothered me how such a preoccupation with these encyclicals can fit into the Masses we celebrate in Payatas - when the noise of dump trucks and bulldozers competes with the singing of the children's choir, or the blessing during the *epiclesis* also doubles as a gesture for driving the flies away to prevent them from diving into the chalice (sometimes successfully, at other times not!), etc. Thus, people on the ground could not really care less about a recent crazy debate on the English translation of the Eucharist (on whether it is "The Lord be with you" or "with your spirit"). To invite Jesus "to enter under my roof" does not resonate at all for peoples who have no roofs over their heads. What a real disconnect!

3. Closed Churches

Many people on the ground do not really have time for these debates. They can only hope that the Church is there for them when they need it. If it is not there, they would look for God somewhere else - maybe in popular religions, Pentecostal groups or maybe in the garbage, who knows. In one of those big conferences which we organized in the Philippines, we asked some leaders of these communities on what they can tell the bishops, priests, sisters and other leaders of the church. In summary, they said one simple thing: "please do not be too strict". The poor feels that the Church is a rigid, legalistic and "closed" institution.

In another forum on sexually violated women, we invited some survivors to be our resource persons. One of them shared her story: On the day she was raped, she ran to church hoping that someone was there to help. But it was closed. So she ran to the cemetery instead. She read the tombstones and the RIP next to their names. Not knowing much English, she read "rip" and thought this must be "rape". "Oh my God, " she said, "they were all raped and they are dead now. Thank you, Lord, I am still alive." At the end of her talk, what was impressed on us was a simple appeal: "Can you please leave the Church open?" Listening to her, I thought: " What irony! She found God alive in the cemetery because the Church is closed." She was talking about the physical church, of course. But metaphorically speaking, the same closed mentalities do abound.

4. Closed Theologies

My small contribution to this debate is to discern this "closed outlook" in theological methods. If I am going to summarize what I would say, it is this: It is not only our churches and mentalities which are closed but also the way we do theology. It is these closed methods that make the Church deaf both to people's voices and to the whispers of the Spirit. In the end, we have a dead church - so closed and so dead that God has decided to move to the cemetery. This calls for a discussion on theological method, an exercise that can be very technical and jargon-filled and which also makes people hate theology. Since this is a mixed audience, I will try my best to make this understandable for all. For those interested in the wider debates and detailed arguments, I can refer you to some articles and books I have written on the topic.

In the theological field, I have tried to identify two prominent methods of doing theology that I think are also representative of some others; one of them modern, the other postmodern. The first is radical orthodoxy; the second is liberation theology. Much has been written on both subjects up to now. I am choosing two great authors who have provided methodological reflection on their respective movements. The first is John Milbank, professor

at the University of Nottingham, who first came to prominence with his book *Theology and Social Theory*. The second author is Clodovis Boff, a Brazilian priest of the Servite Order, whose methodological book *Theology and Praxis* is the one of the most comprehensive works on the method of liberation theology.

4.2 Postmodern Theologies: Radical Orthodoxy

Milbank's work is considered "a tour de force of systematic theology" and cited by *The Church Times* as among the "100 Best Christian Books". Stanley Hauerwas considered its second edition in 2006 "a bombshell" and Charles Taylor aligned his book *A Secular Age* (2007) with Milbank's work and the radical orthodoxy movement. Very much ahead of his time, at least in the theological field, Milbank was one of the first to unmask the metanarrative of human and social sciences and advocated its expulsion in theological discourse. He crusaded against secular politics, capitalist economy, sociology, dialectical philosophy and postmodernity in order to recover the displaced Christendom. Milbank is a very erudite and prolific writer. It is impossible and unfair to summarize his work here. Let me just mention one objection to his method about which I wrote in an earlier work: his closed theological structure. Milbank's project was intended to retrieve theology from its captivity in the social and human sciences. He thinks that in modern times, theology has been "positioned" or high-jacked by social theory. It suffers from what he calls "false humility" by refusing to qualify, criticize or position other discourses. Even as this is necessary, Milbank unfortunately swings the pendulum to other side of the spectrum. One of his critics describes his project as that of "a hero in quest of a stolen crown."

Once upon a time, it was theology that wore the crown, theology that carried out most of the fundamental reading of all other interpretations and all other social formations... It was the master narrative. Stolen by secular reason, and worn as 'social theory', the master-narrative is now sought by its earlier owner. (Gerard Loughlin)

Like all warriors and crusaders, Milbank has friends and enemies. On his side would be Augustine, Blondel, de Lubac, McIntyre and some others. On the opposite bank are the thinkers in the secular sciences and philosophies, modern and postmodern, from Marx to Weber, from Foucault to Nietzsche, as well as theologies which use modern philosophies and social theories like that of Rahner and the liberation theologians. And as in all wars, the enemies are demonized. In the end, Milbank thinks we do not need other sciences - social science, even philosophy or metaphysics - because theology in itself suffices. In his hands,

theology has become a "closed science". Although his book is "Theology and Social Theory", what he actually means is: "Theology is a Social Theory". So if we have closed off our doors to dialogue with other sciences because "Christian theology" is enough, how else can we listen to voices other than our own - those of my friends in Payatas and elsewhere? Not all of them are Catholics, nor even Christians. I had the privilege of listening to Milbank himself in a conference when I was still a young PhD student many years ago. In the open forum, I raised this question: "Sir, I come from the Philippines. If Christian theology should be the only narrative that suffices, how will it look like to my Muslim neighbors?" His response was short and dismissive: "Well, that is your problem, not mine," he said. I am sure he no longer remembers me nor my question. But the way he answered is quite reflective of his own exclusivist theological position.

4.2 Liberation Theologies: Clodovis Boff

One of Milbank's considered "opponents" is liberation theology's foremost methodological work *Theology and Praxis* by Clodovis Boff. Boff wrote this work as his dissertation at the Université Catholique du Louvain, Belgium in 1976 - just about the time the first generation of liberation theologians (Gutierrez, Assman, Segundo, Bonino) began to grapple with charges of the "ideologization of the faith". Ratzinger's document against liberation theology appeared in 1984 but the International Theological Commission (ITC) already started to study liberation theology in 1974 - about the time that Boff was writing his dissertation. We can thus understand Boff's concern: it was to institute a theological method to protect liberation theology from the incursion of ideologies.

Boff's work of almost 500 pages is very difficult to understand. But simply put, it was a technical elaboration of the "see-judge-act" process. For those among us familiar with Basic Christian Communities or the Young Christian Workers movement, "see-judge-act" is a handy methodology with which to reflect on the Word of God in context. These three questions are crucial: (1) What is our situation?; (2) What does God tell us about our situation?; and (3) What do we need to do to transform our situation? Thus, in the end, we have a practical theology that does not deal with abstractions, but is really grounded in whatever the context is (for example, poverty, injustice, oppression).

But it is precisely also this method's use of Marxist analysis to analyze the situation that is vulnerable to ideological manipulation. We have heard of how many these communities had been co-opted by Communist parties for their own revolutionary agenda. This was true in Latin America, but also in the Philippines, India and elsewhere. Thus, Boff took great pains to veer his theological method away from this danger. How did he do it? By adopting mainly

the notion of 'practice' from a French philosopher, Louis Althusser. This is how Althusser defines it:

By practice in general I shall mean any process of transformation of a determinate given raw material into a determinate product, a transformation effected by a determinate human labour, using determinate means of production. In any practice thus conceived, the determinant moment is neither the raw material nor the product but the practice in the narrow sense; the moment of the labour of transformation itself. (*For Marx*)

If we are going to transpose this Althusserian principle into theological theory, it spells something like this: the result of social analysis from the ground serves as "raw material"; the pastoral action shall serve as "product". But what is important is what the theologian does and uses in order to transform the raw materials into the product. In Boff's technical language, it is the "content of Christian faith", in short, revelation, doctrines, dogmas. To use a mechanical metaphor, it is this content that serves as fuel to process the given "raw material" in order to come up with the "theological product". Applying it to our concerns, the voices of peoples from the ground serve as the "raw material". And, following Althusser, Boff believes that the "raw material" is not very important; neither is the resulting pastoral action. What is really important is the act - the "theological production" done by the theologian. If you go back to the see-judge-act process, what is crucial is the second movement: the act of judging by the theologian and the Christian principles used.

I do not want to burden you with this technical language but I feel it is necessary to resort to it in order to make some conclusions at this point. In the end, Milbank and Boff - theologians who find themselves at opposite sides of the ideological spectrum - in fact possess a common weakness. Both enthrone the "theologian" as the ultimate arbiter of theological meaning at the expense of voices from the ground. In short, what is central to these famous theological methods is actually the theologian and the theologian's principles. (On the side, you can also include the Magisterium with their preoccupation with doctrine.) Boff needs to defend liberation theology from ideological charges. So, he keeps theological theory safe from the incursion of empirical voices. Milbank, for his part, also feels compelled to protect Christian theology from the encroachment of nihilist narratives of theory. Thus, the role of the theologian in this postmodern cacophony of voices is to propose another narrative, poetically reinvent Christian meaning. To quote Milbank, "this entire ecclesial task falls on him [the theologian]".

5. Reflexive Theologizing

What is my alternative to get out of these difficulties? In short, I call it "reflexive theologizing". Here I enlist the help of some thinkers to give voice to people on the rough grounds. Let me mention three: Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist; Thomas Aquinas, the Dominican theologian; and Albert Einstein, the scientist. I was amazed at this convergence of sciences. In a previous work, I took more than 200 pages to explain the sociological theory of Pierre Bourdieu and its implications on theology. In order to summarize it, let me just quote one crucial paragraph from him to bring out my point.

Science has a time which is not that of practice. For the analyst, time disappears: not only because the analyst cannot have any uncertainty as to what can happen, but also because he has time to totalize, that is, to overcome the effects of time. (*The Logic of Practice*)

Here, Bourdieu compares the view of "science" (or theory) and the view of "practice". Practice has a certain logic which is not accessible to science. Transposed to my problematic, people on the rough ground have a certain logic which is not accessible to the academic, the theologian included. Bourdieu talks about the "feel for the game". To the person engaged in practice, to the player on the ground, the "sense of time" is important - its tempo, its irreversibility, acceleration. Because the observer - the analyst, the academi- stands outside of the game, he does not really feel its urgency, its time.

In order to make this clearer, let us look at the phenomenon of "gift-giving". Anthropologists have shown us that ancient societies were engaged in endless gift-exchanges. These societies lived and thrived on gift-exchange: products, pearls, even inter-marriages. When a gift is given, a counter-gift automatically comes. This is what anthropologists call "cycles of reciprocity". But for Bourdieu, this synchronized view is an observer's view, a view from above, a view from an outsider. When I was doing my PhD, I was living in a building with other students on campus. One day, my neighbor shared with me a meal which she had just cooked. A few hours later, I knocked on her door and also shared what I had prepared that night. She got upset, and asked me why I had to return the favor right away. The rush with which I accomplished my own gift-giving invalidated her gift, and made it look like I was paying for it. Thus, the time between giving and reciprocating is crucial to the character of gift-exchange because if one does it too soon, it nullifies the gift. This knowledge is only known to the players of the gift-exchange economy, not to outsiders.

Let us go to Albert Einstein. In a 1921 lecture entitled "Geometry and Reality", he told the scientist-members of the Prussian Academy of Sciences: "As far as the laws of

mathematics refer to reality, they are not certain; and as far as they are certain, they do not refer to reality." Even mathematics which has gained a reputation for being the most exact science can never fully represent actual life. I do not really understand Einstein that much but what this says is that the mathematician, scientist, philosopher or theologian (and all academics for that matter) can never really understand the experience of the man and woman on the street. For, in the words of Bourdieu, academics are infected with what he calls the "scholastic point of view" - a certain disposition which is a product of leisurely universes where people can "seriously play" or busily experiment with thought, freed as they are from the uncertainty and urgency about tomorrow because their 'state of life' (or, in some countries, the State treasury) provides for them. As you well know, *skholè* (from which school comes from) is the Greek word for leisure - a location which takes us away from the world of practice.

What does this mean for theology? Let me mention two concrete repercussions: (a) the theological reflexivity; and (a) the role of praxis in theological method.

5.1 Theological Reflexivity

If theory could not fully comprehend praxis, the first act of any theology is to acknowledge the limits of its language. Theology therefore needs to be "modest" and should bow to the experiences of people from the ground. This is what I call "reflexive theologizing". Reflexivity has been around the academic field for some time now. Bourdieu's contribution, however, is to unmask the fallacies coming from our belonging to leisurely world of the *skholè* (of which the academic field is just one example). In concrete, Bourdieu's framework alerts us to the fact that the bishop, the pastor, the theologian, the pastoral worker or the community organizer can never really comprehend the experiences of people on the ground. The life and death stakes of the poor are absent in their leisurely scholastic world, the world of the observer. At the end of the day, we go back to our well-heated homes and sturdy buildings, to our air-conditioned classrooms and libraries, while these people have to worry all night if their roofs (if they have any) will still be there when they wake up. To realize this is to step back and tell ourselves that not one of us can have the last word. That is "theological reflexivity". Some call it "humility"; others call it "theological modesty". But beyond being a personal virtue or desirable attitude (e.g., that the academic should be modest or humble), reflexivity is a structure rooted in the sociological and epistemological dimensions of our being human. This means that in order to be true to our humanity, there is no other way but to be reflexive.

This brings me to Thomas Aquinas, the theologian. All in all, Aquinas has produced approximately 80 philosophical and theological works, 85 sermons and others. But at the end of his life, he hung up his instruments and stopped writing or dictating anything. Brother Reginald who was his assistant asked him why: "Reginald, I cannot, because all that I have written seems like straw to me." There are many interpretations of this event in the life of Aquinas, but from the perspective of what I am saying here, Thomas seems to realize that theology is just like "straw" in the face of the Divine, in front of the Real. The event points to the limits of theological language, of all our scientific language, for the matter. This brings me to my next point.

5.2. Role of Praxis in Theological Method

If theological theory is limited, we therefore need to open up our method - not only to the working of the Spirit, but also to the voices of praxis from the rough grounds. For us in Vincentian institutions, this is not a difficult conclusion to make because, like Vincent de Paul, we know that God speaks from the rough grounds of the poor's lives. For a Vincentian, and for any Christian for that matter, this is the privileged location of God's presence. I would like to argue that the voices, sentiments, reflections and praxis from the rough grounds are necessary to develop, change, modify or subvert the way we have formulated our doctrines, dogmas and beliefs.

This is not a new thing. The Church has always recognized the *sensus fidelium*. But when a doctrine is challenged by voices from the ground, the Magisterium and theologians alike close their doors and say, the Church is not "a democracy" or doctrine is not about statistics, etc. Though I agree that there is something greater about the faith than the results of opinion surveys, these excuses are also used by those in power as alibis not to listen. This explains why I feel ambivalent about the developments of the recent Synod in Rome. On the one hand, all of them agreed that there is a need "to develop a different type of theology in which we can learn from the lived experience of families and the difficulties they are going through". On the other hand, they are also saying: "we do not intend to change the doctrine; we are only applying it to people".

Perhaps my humble proposal can help a bit in sorting out where this ambivalence is coming from. And, in order not to pay mere lip service to *sensus fidelium*, viable processes need to be set up for the church to deeply listen to the faithful. The recent document on *Sensus Fidei* (2014) contemplates on why majority of the faithful remain indifferent to some doctrinal or moral injunctions issued by the Magisterium. There are two possible reasons: weakness on the part of the faithful and lack of consultation.

This lack of reception may indicate a weakness or lack of faith on the part of the people of God... But in some cases it may indicate that certain decisions have been taken by those in authority without due consideration of the experience of the faithful, or without sufficient consultation of the faithful by the Magisterium. (*Sensus Fidei*, 123)

The document thus identifies some structures to make this consultation happen, e.g., diocesan synods, parish councils. But even as these structures are made to work properly in diocesan and parish levels, the members of these bodies are in fact participated in by people of the *skholé* and headed by the Magisterium. I have painstakingly searched throughout the document where the poor - those coming from the rough grounds of Payatas and elsewhere - can participate and be heard. It makes me sad because there is no such mention. Yet it is they to whom the psalm refers and to which we acclaim in our liturgies: "The Lord hears the cry of the poor" (Psalm 34).

6. By Way of Conclusion

I would like to conclude with the image used in the flyer for this lecture. It portrays the scavengers sorting out their "catch" for the day - washing the plastic materials one by one, drying the paper and cardboard pieces, piling them up, weighing them so they can get paid by the junkshop owner at day's end. The lady in violet is a young Indonesian nun who was one of my theology students. In these immersion programs, I usually tell my scavenger friends to teach our students how they work and live. Just that. At the end of one such working day, my scavenger friend shared with me what he jokingly told the young nun: "Sister, you are now good at the work that we do. Should you decide not to pursue your vocation, you can come back here. You're hired!"

I thought his joke can also offer a perspective on how theology should be done today. The "rough grounds" are not afraid to ask painful questions. And their questions should make us rethink our theologies, revise our options and alter our lives.

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